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JACK PIERCE: UNIVERSAL MAN OF MONSTERS

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Getting old with Citizen Kane

In 1935 Elsa Lanchester and Boris Karlof starred in Universal's feature film *The Bride of Frankenstein.* Make-up by Jack Pierce. Photo courtesy of Daniel Roebuck.

Features

34 Jack Pierce: Universal Man of Monsters

18 Citizen Seiderman

28 The Treasures of Trade Show 3

Departments

6 Editor's Note

7 Letters

8 Industry Buzz

12 Product News

16 Retro Reviews
John Goodwin

50 Beauty Breakdown

52 Backstage
Gary Christensen

54 Lab Tech
Tom McLaughlin

56 Still Life
Pamela Taylor

58 Tech Tips
Barry Koper

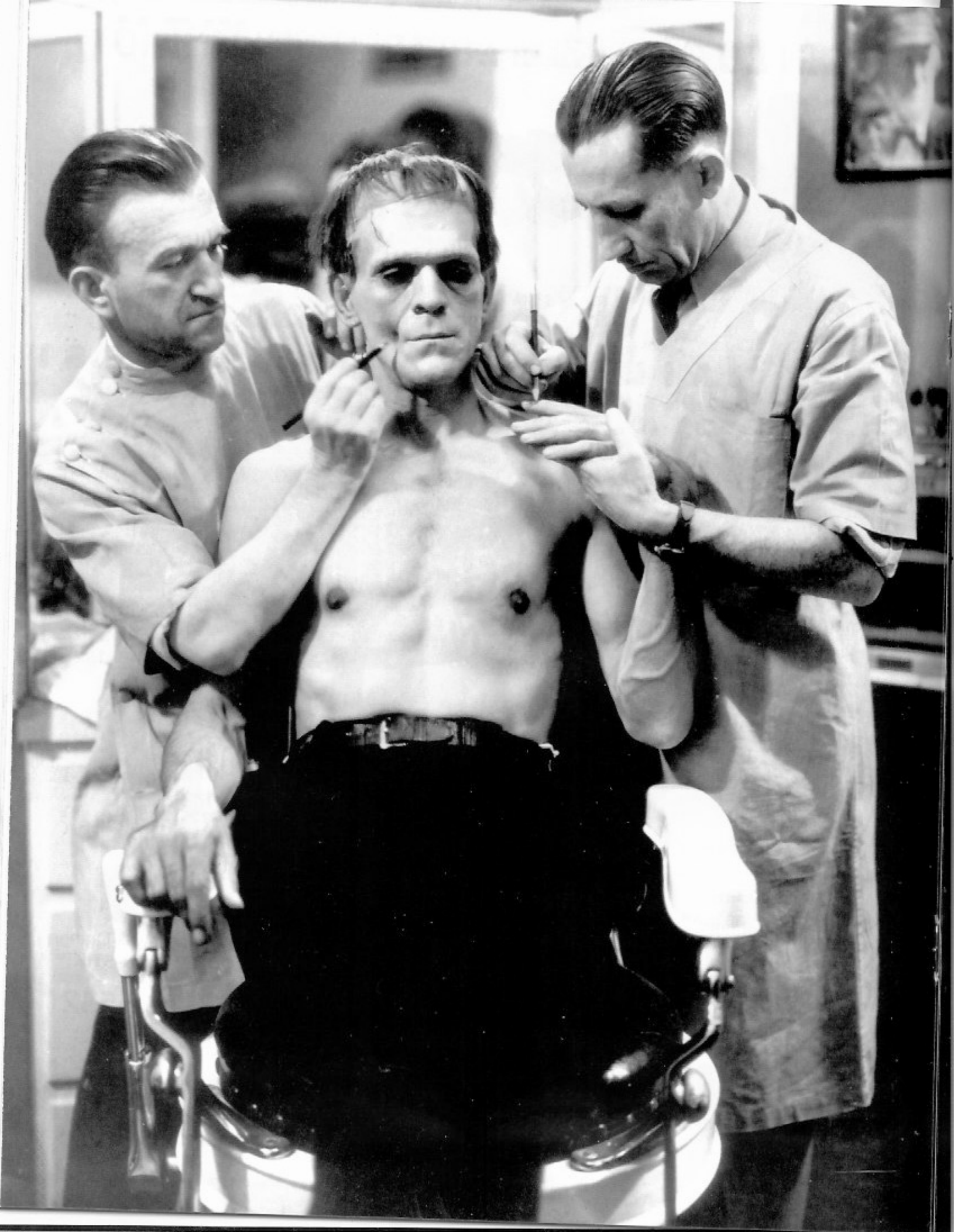
49 Westmore's Wisdom
Michael Westmore

60 The Call Sheet

65 Classified Ads

65 Advertisers Index

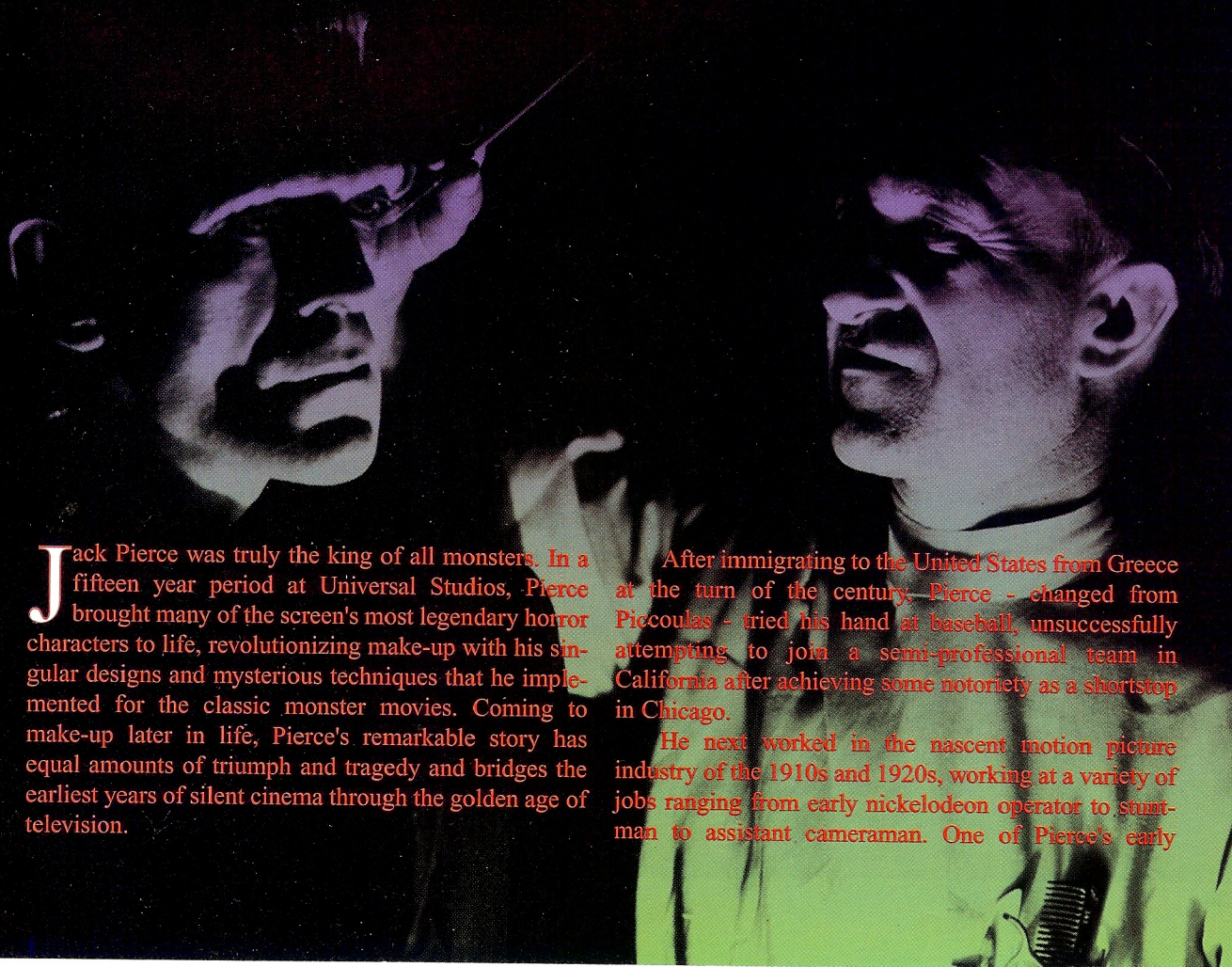
66 Martini Shot



JACK PIERCE

Universal Man of Monsters

Article by Scott Essman



Jack Pierce was truly the king of all monsters. In a fifteen year period at Universal Studios, Pierce brought many of the screen's most legendary horror characters to life, revolutionizing make-up with his singular designs and mysterious techniques that he implemented for the classic monster movies. Coming to make-up later in life, Pierce's remarkable story has equal amounts of triumph and tragedy and bridges the earliest years of silent cinema through the golden age of television.

After immigrating to the United States from Greece at the turn of the century, Pierce - changed from Piccoulas - tried his hand at baseball, unsuccessfully attempting to join a semi-professional team in California after achieving some notoriety as a shortstop in Chicago.

He next worked in the nascent motion picture industry of the 1910s and 1920s, working at a variety of jobs ranging from early nickelodeon operator to stuntman to assistant cameraman. One of Pierce's early

Above: Although Pierce is known for his monsters he was equally adept at other forms of make-up. He would make up the leading ladies as well as the heavies.
Below: Karlof in Pierce's office at Universal Studios, probably discussing *The Mummy*.

champions was Harry Culver - the founder of Culver City - who at one time had Pierce managing a string of movie theaters.

Pierce eventually drifted to acting, working at both Universal Pictures and Vitagraph as an extra and character actor, often creating his own original make-ups for each part.

In 1915, after only three years in the business, Universal founder Carl Laemmle established Universal City on a vast stretch of the virginal San Fernando Valley north of Hollywood. Undoubtedly, Laemmle had a working relationship with Jack Pierce, as the young talent plied his acting and assistant directing talents at the new studio in the mid-1910s through the mid-1920s.

But Pierce was only getting warmed up in his first fifteen years in the fledgling movie business. Jack Pierce had established a striking portfolio of his own characters in the silent film years. Like another Universal subordinate named Lon Chaney, Pierce perfected his skills, so necessary for character actors who wanted regular work in "feature" films, what are now called "shorts," at the time. Chaney and Pierce had both worked at the studio in the 1910s, and it is likely that Pierce developed some of his basic make-up techniques from the man who, in 1918, became a freelance actor. While Chaney made silent 1920s classics like *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Phantom of the Opera* at Universal, he made many of his other films of that time at MGM. When Chaney did leave Universal, Pierce probably saw a window of opportunity for his make-up abilities to shine, but in the mid-1920s, Pierce began to abandon acting and started to create his original characters on other people. In this way, he was one of the first true make-up artists - someone who could be brought in to create an original character on any given actor. Laemmle was ironically not the first executive to make use of Pierce's talents in this manner.

In 1926, Bill Fox brought Pierce to Fox Studios to create a character for his film *The Monkey Talks*. Working with Jacques Lernier, Pierce devised an ape make-up, including a built-up muzzle, brow, and detailed hair work, that inadvertently evokes John Chambers' refined designs for *Planet of the Apes* 40 years later. His work on *The Monkey Talks* brought Pierce due recognition, and he returned to Universal roundly appreciated. By 1928, Carl Laemmle made his son Carl

Junior head of production of Universal, and the 21-year-old executive wasted little time in making use of Pierce's newly recognized skills.

For one of the last of the silent films made at Universal, Pierce created the wickedly grinning character of Gwynplaine, the tortured hero in the studio's lavish adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel, *The Man Who Laughs*. As Pierce interpreted the character, working his magic on Conrad Veidt - star of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Gwynplaine's carved smile and trussed hair is widely credited as being the inspiration for the Joker character in the Batman comics. If *The Monkey Talks* hadn't cemented Pierce's fortune at Universal, *The Man Who Laughs* did so, as Laemmle Junior made Pierce department head of make-up in 1928. But it was only the beginning for the 39-year old Pierce, as Junior then announced his decision to produce film versions of the classic horror novels. However, the "silent" era was drawing to a close, leading to a completely new concept of selecting actors for roles in features films. Although it had been widely speculated that Lon Chaney would play Dracula (and in some accounts, Frankenstein's monster) had he lived, evidence suggests that Universal's inquiries into acquiring Chaney led to several dead ends with MGM, Chaney's contracted studio at the time.

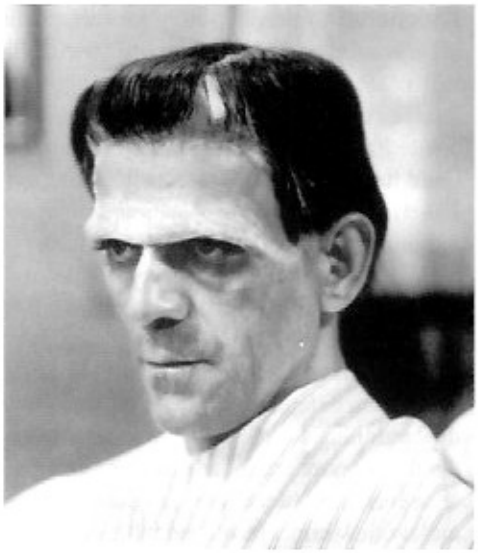
Tod Browning, who had directed Chaney in films at Universal as far back as 1919, and had directed the renowned vampire picture *London After Midnight* with Chaney in 1927, was back at Universal by 1930, but this too was more correlation than causation for the eventual director of *Dracula*, as his presence meant little in the pursuit of Chaney as the starring character.

Then, Chaney unexpectedly died in 1930, just after the birth of "talkies," in one sense, passing the torch to Jack Pierce. During the next 17 years from 1930-1947, Pierce created some of cinema history's most distinguished screen characters, and he did so from the bungalow in which Chaney had created many of his marvels.

Bela Lugosi had been playing Dracula on the New York stage and won the part in Universal's film adaptation. Though Pierce longed to create an elaborate vampire make-up for the Hungarian actor, Lugosi rejected this idea, insisting that he apply his own make-up as he had done in the theater. Instead, Pierce designed a green greasepaint for the actor and suggested a hairstyle, while concentrating on the look of Dracula's brides and Dwight Frye's Renfield with hairstyling department head Lily Dirigo and costume designer Vera West. When *Dracula* proved a smash success after its release in February of 1931, the Laemmles clamored for a follow-up film, but Junior already new exactly what he wanted to do. Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, had long been considered one of the most frightening stories ever written, and Universal felt that it would be the perfect successor to *Dracula*, and an ideal vehicle for Lugosi as the monster. What happened next is a piece of now-missing cinema history. With original director Robert Florey, Lugosi and Pierce devised a monster make-up and shot test footage that was ultimately dismissed by Junior Laemmle as being derivative of the 1922 film *The Golem*; the footage and any stills of the original character have never been found.

Junior quickly reassigned Florey to another project and Lugosi eventually withdrew from the film with him, not wanting to wear a make-up that would wholly cover his features. Florey's essential screenplay was retained but James Whale quickly replaced him as director and cast the film as he saw fit.

After other candidates to play the monster were rejected, as

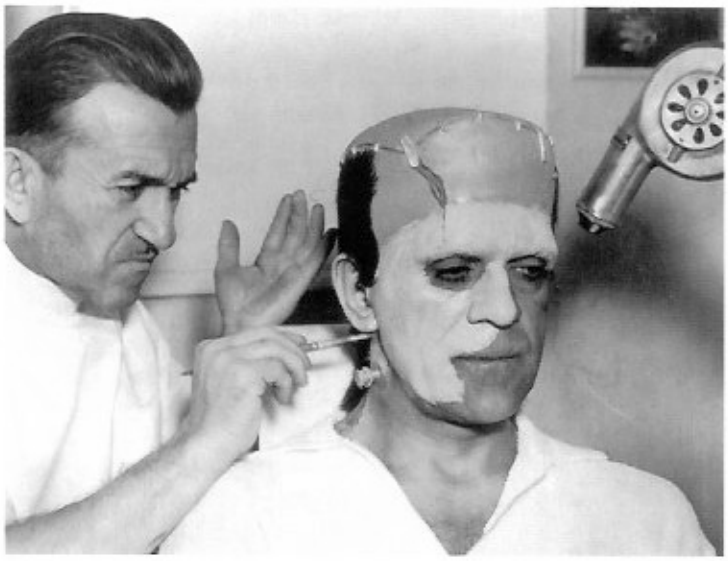


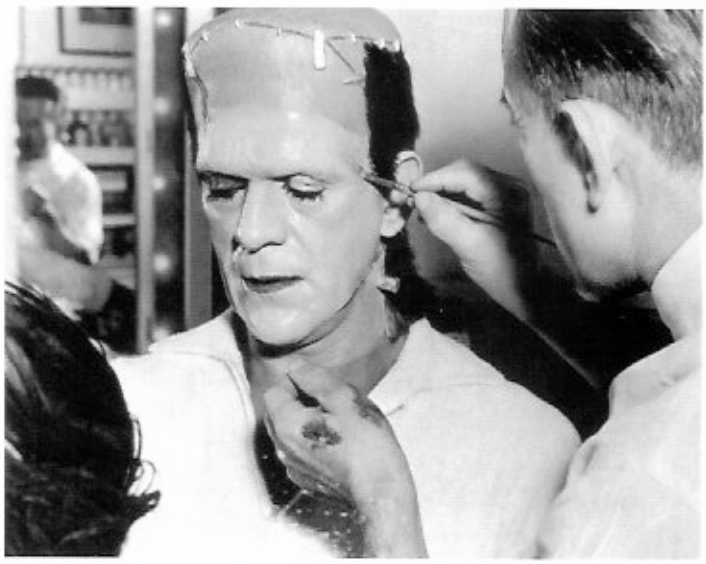
legend has it, Whale discovered Boris Karloff in the Universal commissary and immediately liked his facial features. Whale put Pierce and Karloff together, and for three weeks, the pair worked three hours each night to devise a monster make-up. It was Pierce's first real chance to create something unforgettable in the genre. Obviously, he took full advantage of it.

Before his secretive meetings with Karloff, however, Pierce described his preparation for his work on the Frankenstein monster. "In 1930, Junior Laemmle brought me the book and I read it three times," Pierce told TV host Wayne Thomas in 1962, "and from that, I did research work for six months before I created the Frankenstein monster. It was a lot of hard work, trying to find ways and means, what can you do? Frankenstein wasn't a doctor; he was a scientist, so to put in a new brain, he had to take the head and open it, then he had to work from that. Instead of sewing it up, he took wires to rivet the head. The next thing is to find out, from electricity, how the man was created to bring him to life. I had to add the electrical outlets on the monster's neck to allow Frankenstein to connect electricity."

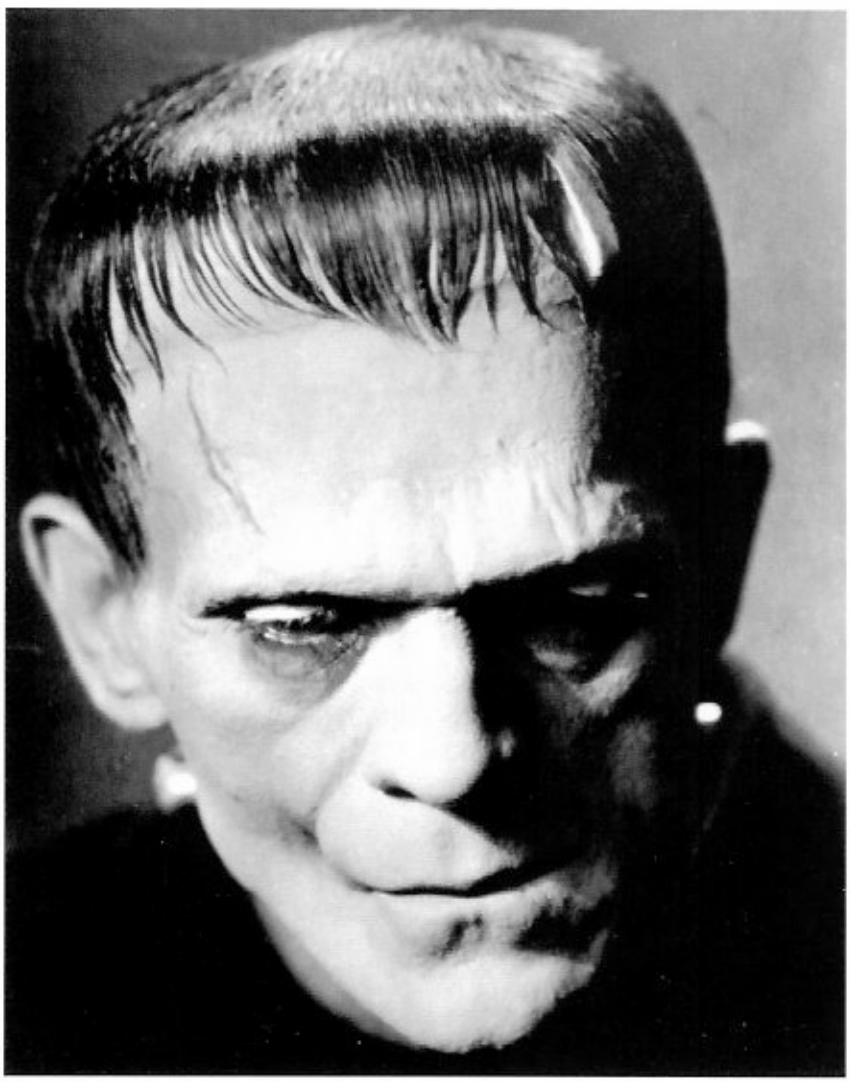
Pierce further recounted how the wig was made, but that the head was built up, or "modeled" every day of shooting. Using a combination of cotton, collodion, and spirit gum, Pierce created the head and utilized a gray-green greasepaint that he designed through the Max Factor organization. He blackened Karloff's fingernails to indicate that his hands had been bound, and Karloff suggested sagging his eyelids, leading to Pierce adding mortician's wax to them. The four-hour process included a steel spine, struts for Karloff's legs, and massive boots and body padding. "The coat was cut down so the length of arms and the fingers would look long," Pierce added. "Everything was in black to give him the height, to look eight-feet tall. I didn't really teach him how to walk. Boris and I would talk, but the man is so wonderful, I think the greatest of them all as far as playing these parts. I believe this character has been the greatest of all monsters portrayed in motion pictures."

If Pierce had stopped after *Frankenstein*, his name might have passed into make-up legend regardless, but his next significant make-up project - another collaboration with Karloff - was equal to the Frankenstein monster in its innovation and timeless appeal. *The Mummy* was less based on a novel than the actual 1922 discovery of King Tut's tomb and the mystery surrounding the character. Though Karloff would spend most of the film in an effectively wrinkled Pierce make-up as Ardath Bey, the opening scene of the film provided Pierce with as formidable a make-up chal-



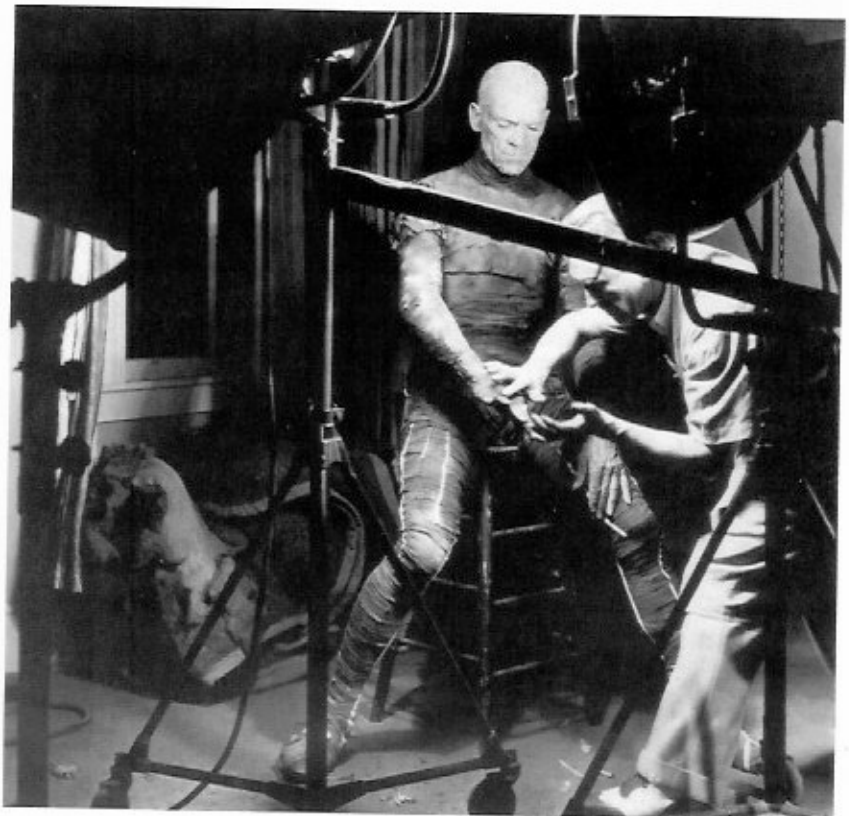


The mad scientist and his monster. Photos from Frankenstein, 1931. Although Karlof would wear this make-up many more times throughout his career it was never equalled.



lenge as any he had faced before or since. For the initial appearance of Im-Ho-Tep, Pierce was tasked with creating the visage of a 3500-year-old mummy who comes to life on screen. "It was a complete eight-hour make-up," Pierce told Thomas, "from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. The bandages on the body had to be put on. Then I had to seal them with tape so that they wouldn't unravel. Then after that, I had to put the burned bandages on, so when he gets out of the sarcophagus and starts to walk, the bandages would break and the dust will fall off exactly as a mummy that's been buried for 3500 years. It was an hour and a half to take it all off."

Along with the first glimpse of Frankenstein's monster in three successively tighter James Whale closeups, the moment when the Mummy opens his eyes for the first time in 35 centuries is perhaps Jack Pierce's pinnacle as a make-up artist. A splendid con-



coction of fuller's earth and deteriorated bandages, having been repeatedly soaked in acid for a week before they were applied, Im-Ho-Tep's cinematic introduction remained unsurpassed in the many Mummy sequels, re-makes and re-interpretations that followed. For his work on *The Mummy*, Pierce received an award from the Hollywood Filmograph.

In the 1930s, Pierce engaged in many respectable projects at Universal, who now had the prized monster maker at their disposal. Pierce created characters for Karloff and Lugosi in films which included *The Black Cat*, *The Raven*, and *The Invisible Ray*, with the actors as a duo. At this same time, the Universal brass also kept Pierce and Karloff working as a pair on shows like Whale's *The Old Dark House*, and later *The Tower of London*. Pierce even did make-up for Whale's *The Invisible Man*, though not much was necessary for the title character! Junior Laemmle tried to mount several other early 1930s projects that never came to fruition, including new sound versions of *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and a werewolf picture as a vehicle for Boris Karloff. Pierce would have to wait until 1935's *Werewolf of London*, starring Henry Hull to create his first wolf character, but Hull rejected Pierce's concept much like Lugosi had on *Dracula*, and Pierce created a scaled-down version for Hull in its place; Pierce's complete wolf make-up would have to wait for a new era at the studio. By far, the make-up that would become as immediately identifiable as Pierce's earlier monster characters was Elsa' Lanchester's ghoulish beauty in *Bride of Frankenstein*. Surprisingly simple, Pierce's conception of the bride, only seen in the film's final moments, was no more than iconic wig and an effective "glamour," make-up, accentuating the actress' prominent lips, eyes and eyebrows to go with her grisly neck scars. In addition, Karloff's monster make-up was modified for the sequel, giving him a burned appearance and adding clamps to the top of his skull. The film was an unqualified hit and Pierce's status was further elevated in his superior execution of a female character. In 1936, Universal created another atypical sequel, *Dracula's Daughter*, for which Pierce devised a haunting gothic make-up for actor Irving Pichel, among other standouts. Seemingly on the top of the world, and with untold greatness ahead of him, only one year later, everything changed for Jack Pierce.

The Laemmle's had never been the most sure-handed group when it came to the financial stability of their studio. By 1936, they were in trouble, and by 1937, a new regime took control of Universal Studios. Sadly, Carl Laemmle, Jr., the man responsible for green-lighting Pierce's great character work, would never produce another movie; both he and his father remained forever detached from the film business. Under the new bosses, Pierce was assigned to overseeing and creating make-up for romantic comedies and melodramas; he created excellent beauty and character make-ups for Universal stars of the time, including Deanna Durbin and a young Vincent Price. It might have seemed that the horror films were dead in the water, but in the summer of 1938, a movie theater in the Los Angeles area began showing *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* on a double bill - the pairing was an unqualified smash and led to Universal's hasty assembly of *Son of Frankenstein*, once again teaming Pierce and Karloff. Even Bela Lugosi, who wouldn't let Pierce touch him eight years earlier, worked with the make-up master to very quickly devise the character of Ygor, a successful example of Pierce's great hair work. *Son of Frankenstein* was both a blessing and a curse for Jack

Everybody gets in the act. The character established by Karlof would be played by Lon Chaney, Jr. (above) Bela Lugosi (right) and Glen Strange.

Pierce; indeed, it brought back the chance to create memorable characters as in the earlier horror films, but it also relegated them to B-picture status at the turbulent studio. Production heads were shifting regularly, and far less personal care was taken to produce quality monster films. From 1940 through 1945, Universal pumped out numerous sequels, including four *Frankenstein* films, another *Dracula* sequel, and four *Mummy* sequels, typically starring either Karloff, Lugosi, or Lon Chaney, Jr. in one of the leading monster roles. Yet it was an intended B-level horror film with Chaney, Jr. that would give Jack Pierce his last shot at a truly great original character. It would result in being one for all time.

After intending to use his original werewolf make-up conception first for Boris Karloff then for Henry Hull, Pierce finally got to go all out making Lon Chaney, Jr. into the Wolf Man.

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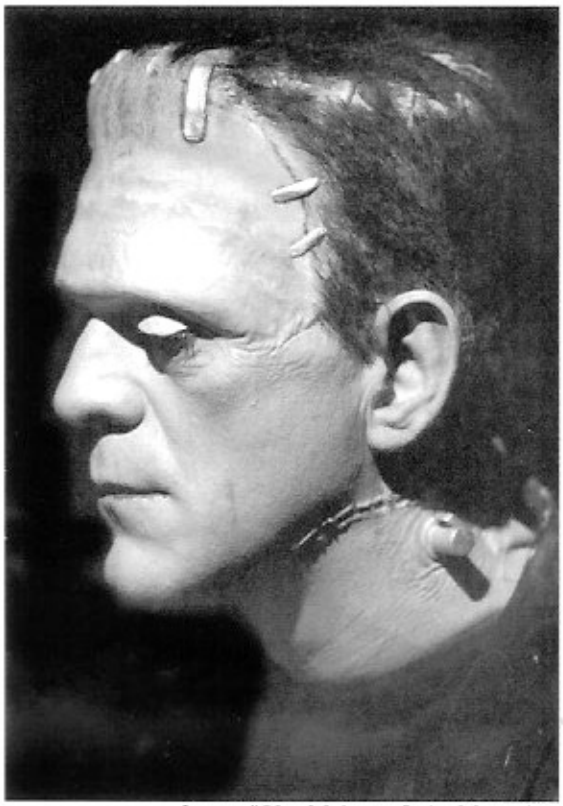

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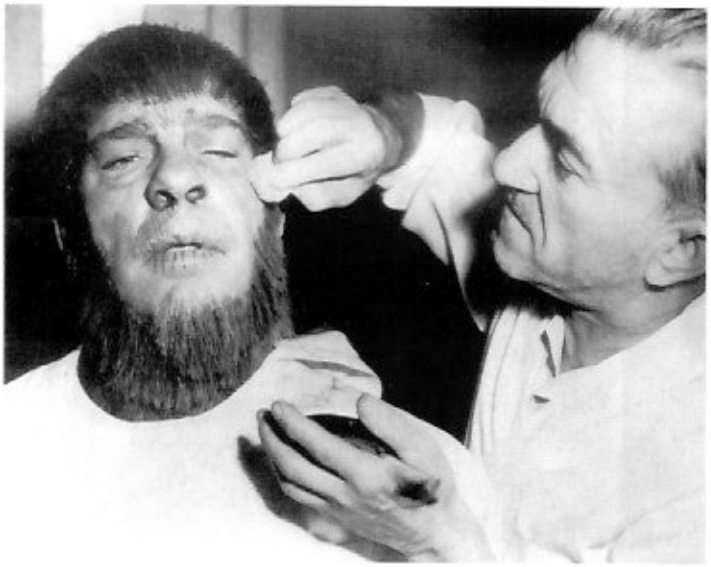
Consisting of an authentically animalistic chest piece, hands, and feet, it is Pierce's conception of the Wolf Man's face and head that are true groundbreakers in the use of make-up and hair work. "It took 2 1/2 hours to apply this make-up," Pierce said in 1962. "I put all of the yak hair on a little row at a time. After the hair is on, you curl it, then singe it, burn it, so that it looks like an animal that's been out in the woods. It had to be done every morning - I don't use masks or any appliances whatsoever, except for the nose. There you either put on a rubber nose or model the nose every day, which would have taken too long." Seen in two "transformation scenes" as well, executed in a series of dissolves by effects expert John P. Fulton, the Wolf Man carries the screen unlike any Pierce character of the time. Though it was made on a modest budget, George Waggner's clever direction, plus heartfelt performances by, Claude Rains, Bela Lugosi, Maria Ouspenskaya, and Chaney, Jr., in conjunction with Pierce's marvelous work, escalated *The Wolf Man* above the other horror films of its time.

In the mid-1940s, Jack Pierce was not for want of interesting projects, though they were rarely up the the standards of his earlier creations. He made Claude Rains into the Phantom of the Opera for a lush color version of the classic tale, first rumored to be a Universal project a dozen years before. Produced by Waggner and directed by Arthur Lubin, the project would be key for Pierce, not only for the gruesome scarring make-up on Rains (reportedly scaled down from its original incarnation at Waggner's request), nor for the fact that it was in color (the lone Pierce monster make-up shot in color), but for the friendship he began with Lubin. During the next two years, Pierce got the chance to create his last version of the Frankenstein monster (he did seven film versions in all), when he made up Western actor Glenn Strange for both *House of*



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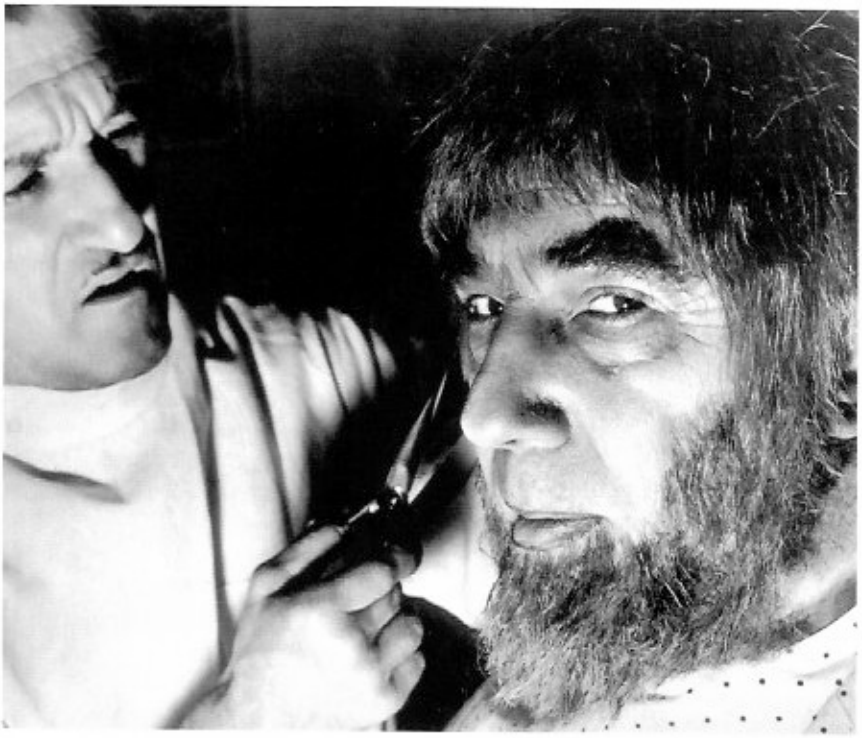

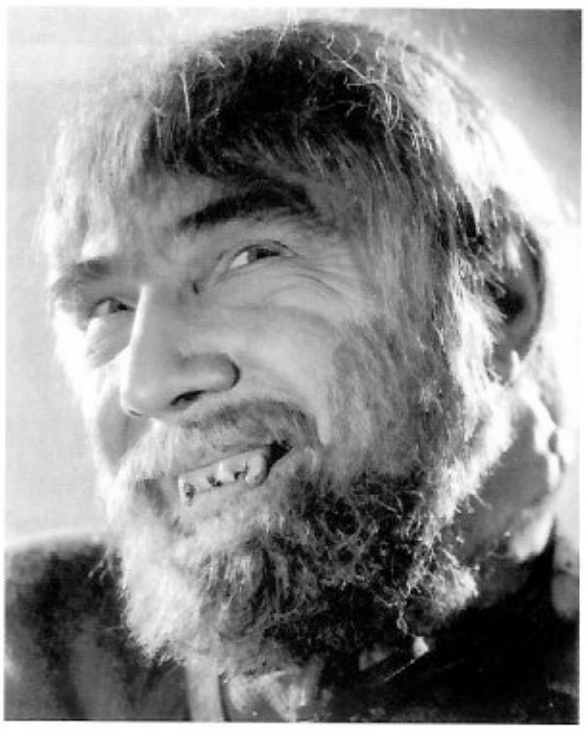

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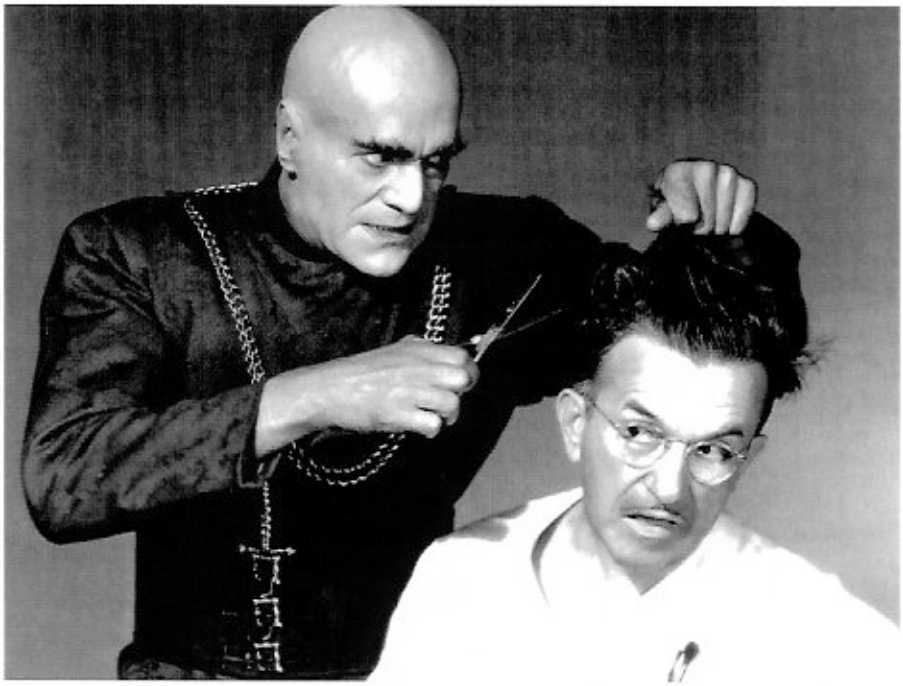
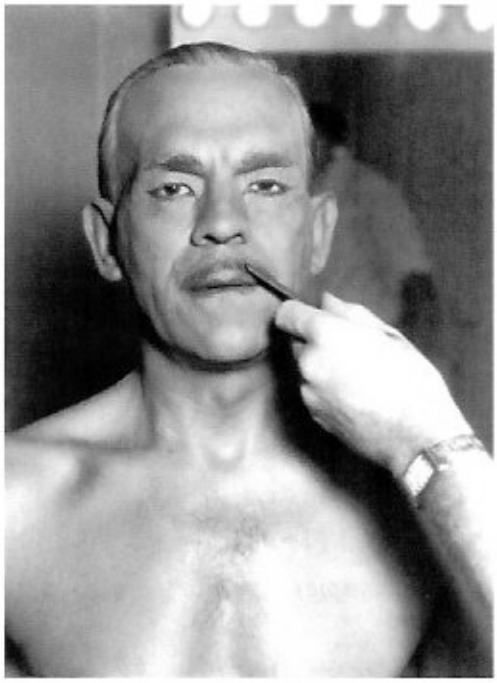
Frankenstein and *House of Dracula*. On the latter film, Pierce worked with new hairstyling department head Carmen Dirigo, whose mother Lily had established the first hair department in Hollywood when she joined Universal in the late 1920s. Jack Pierce probably had no idea that *House of Dracula* would be his final horror film at Universal.

Shortly after WWII ended, Universal merged with the independent International Pictures who immediately brought in a new philosophy. Many of their stars were released from their contracts, and the new studio chief replaced many of their department heads, even those who had been there for decades. John P. Fulton and Vera West were both dismissed in 1947, and around the same time, so was a shocked Jack Pierce. He had worked there for 19 years as make-up department head, had been at Universal in some capacity for over 30 years, and had never signed a contract. Pierce worked on a variety of independent film and television projects during the final twenty years of his life. In the early 1960s, when Pierce was in his early 70s, he was hired as make-up supervisor on the TV show *Mr. Ed* by his friend, producer-director Arthur Lubin. It would be his last project. Jack Pierce died in virtual obscurity in 1968, as only 24 people were said to be at his funeral. Yet many young people have





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long been admirers of Jack Pierce's work, especially make-up artists who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and now run many of the major make-up studios in Hollywood. Perhaps it is some consolation that, although he was forgotten by the industry as a whole in his later years, Jack Pierce lives on through the immortalized images of the Frankenstein monster, The Mummy, The Wolf Man and many others. His legacy is that he was the true father of the classic monsters.

• *Coming in 2000, Scott Essman and VISIONARY MEDIA will present a live theatrical biography of Jack Pierce in the Los Angeles area.*

MA